JOE COLEMAN
MATRIX 139

AUGUST 28—NOVEMBER 14, 1999
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

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JOE COLEMAN/MATRIX 139
THE PATHOLOGICAL PORTRAITURE OF JOE C

JOE COLEMAN IN THE ODDITORIUM

The art of Joe Coleman resonates with paradox. He has worked and exhibited as an artist for over twenty years, yet his work is virtually unknown within mainstream contemporary art circles. He has created books and drawings, presented performances, made paintings and turned his own Brooklyn apartment/studio into a museum of the bizarre. He has been written about by such influential figures as filmmaker Jim Jarmusch and critic and poet John Yau. His paintings and publications are sought after by a dedicated and expanding underground audience. Nevertheless, Coleman is not represented by a commercial gallery and has, until now, never been given a solo exhibition in a mainstream art museum.

Joe Coleman's marginal relationship to the art world is not surprising given his determinedly anti-modernist approach and his disturbing subject matter. In contrast to the modernist aesthetic where "less is more," Coleman's work presents a horror vacui, his paintings crammed with obsessively detailed images, textual quotations, patterns and borders that fuse the decorative and the grotesque. His sources range from medieval iconography to the contemporary tattoo parlor. These diverse elements combine to create a type of narrative, fashioning portraits that represent identity as an accumulation of incidents and characters, transformed by imagination into a synchronic rendition of the fragmented self.

In this MATRIX exhibition, Joe Coleman presents a selection of recent paintings and an installation drawn from his private museum, referred to as the "Odditorium." The subjects of Coleman's portraits—which chiefly comprise criminals, the insane, artists, public figures and Coleman himself—are all non-conformists and transgressors. Coleman conducts detailed research into the lives of

THE BOOK OF REVELATIONS (DETAIL), 1999

his subjects, distilling in the paintings biographical details that suggest an attempt to understand the psyche of even his most psychotic subjects. Yet we are left with a profound sense of the impossibility of rational understanding, as Coleman's work looks with hysterical logic into the abyss of the human mind.

Joe Coleman is fascinated by pathology, both mental and physical. It is the flesh, in all its weakness and vulnerability, that he sees as the one irreducible fact of human experience. In opposition to the Western humanist tradition and the aspirations of the Enlightenment, Coleman does not privilege the mental over the physical. Indeed, in Coleman's cosmology, the mind is simply a bodily organ, defined

THE MAN WHO WALKED THROUGH WALLS, 1995

AMERICAN VENUS (DETAIL), 1997

as human by its very organic instability. In a culture obsessed with the perfection of the body, where ideals of physical health and beauty now aspire to fantasies of hyper-masculinity and femininity, his insistence on the inevitability of disease and decay are often shocking.

Coleman's work brings into question the very idea of the normal. Normality, for this artist, is a repressive fiction masking the reality of human experience. It is, according to Coleman, the so-called abnormal, the pathological and the deviant that most accurately characterize humanity. In a relentless search for his own truth, Coleman's work explores human behavior at its most pathological extremes.

In this regard, Coleman might be seen as contributing to the zeitgeist of millenarian neurosis found in work as diverse as Cindy Sherman's brutally deformed dolls or the "neurotic realism" of recent British art. Yet his work is stridently out of step with the contemporary art canon. It deploys such unfashionable elements as symbolic iconography and biblical narratives, all presented in obsessively miniaturized detail. Coleman's painting takes inspiration from a roll call of apocalyptic visionaries that spans from Hieronymus Bosch to Otto Dix. He bypasses both the "golden age" of High-Renaissance painting and the aesthetic preoccupations of modernism in order to arrive at a strikingly individual style that is part medieval illuminated manuscript, part American cartoon strip.

Every inch of a Coleman panel—he paints, in the medieval manner, on board rather than on canvas—is loaded with significance. Allegorical figures populate his elaborate grisaille borders, often paired with historical or contemporary figures that Coleman associates with the painting's central subject. In the swarming biblical epic, The Book of Revelations, Coleman casts himself and partner Whitney Ward as arbiters of their own Last Judgment, sending more than 100 friends and enemies—each individually portrayed—to heaven and hell respectively.

The iconographic and narrative elements in a Coleman painting are not literally transposed from historical models. Coleman invents his own symbolic and pictorial language, combining image and text in a discontinuous narrative. As portraits, Coleman's images stand outside the familiar conventions of the genre. They are neither bravura renditions of the painterly likeness, nor character studies in the humanist portrait mold. They present real and imagined biographical details wound elaborately around a central subject. These life-stories are neither objective nor linear, evoking the subjective weight of memory and dream in the creation of identity. In this way, each portrait is about the artist as much as it is about the subject, exploring Coleman's fascination with individuals who have tested the limits of socially acceptable human behavior.

The legacy of Coleman's childhood Catholicism is inescapable, both in his theological obsessions and in his insistence on theatricality. The installation of artifacts from Coleman's "Odditorium" brings together objects of religious worship, scientific study and freak-show voyeurism. This conjunction of the bizarre challenges us to consider how social institutions mediate our experience of often similar objects as alternately spiritually uplifting, scientifically instructive or viscerally repugnant.

Coleman's ambition, then, is not simply to shock—although he values the suspension of belief that it entails. Coleman's work provokes us to question the received wisdom that places "us," as viewers, securely within the confines of the normal, able to observe "them," Coleman's subjects, as freaks of nature, never having to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that we may all be subject to forces beyond both our reason and our control.

Nicholas Baume
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
Wadsworth Atheneum

FUCK ELITIST MAG

PUBLIC ENEMY NO. 1, 1999

WORKS IN MATRIX

Mommy/Daddy, 1994
34" x 25", acrylic and fabric on wood
Collection of Martin Wilner

The Man Who Walked Through Walls, 1995
34" x 25", acrylic, fabric and blood on wood
Collection of David Denholtz

Old Man Brown, 1995
25" x 34", acrylic, fabric and gunpowder on wood
Collection of Dana Brunson, Cincinnati

The Holy Saint Adolf II, 1995
34" x 25", acrylic and fabric on wood
Collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin

Ed Gein, 1996
34" x 25", acrylic and fabric on wood
Collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin

American Venus, 1997
34" x 25", acrylic and fabric on wood
Collection of Janice and Mickey Cartin

Coal Man, 1998
34" x 25", acrylic and fabric on wood
Courtesy of Henry Boxer Gallery, London

A Picture from Life's Other Side, 1998
34" x 25", acrylic and fabric on wood
Collection of Craig Rodriguez and Anna Sea, Brooklyn

Lovesong, 1998
34" x 25", acrylic, fabric, blood, hair, skin, fingernails and tin on wood
Courtesy of the artist

In the Realms of the Unreal, 1998
25" x 34", acrylic and fabric on wood
Collection of Robert A. Roth, Chicago

Public Enemy No. 1, 1999
25" x 34", acrylic and fabric on wood
Courtesy of James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles

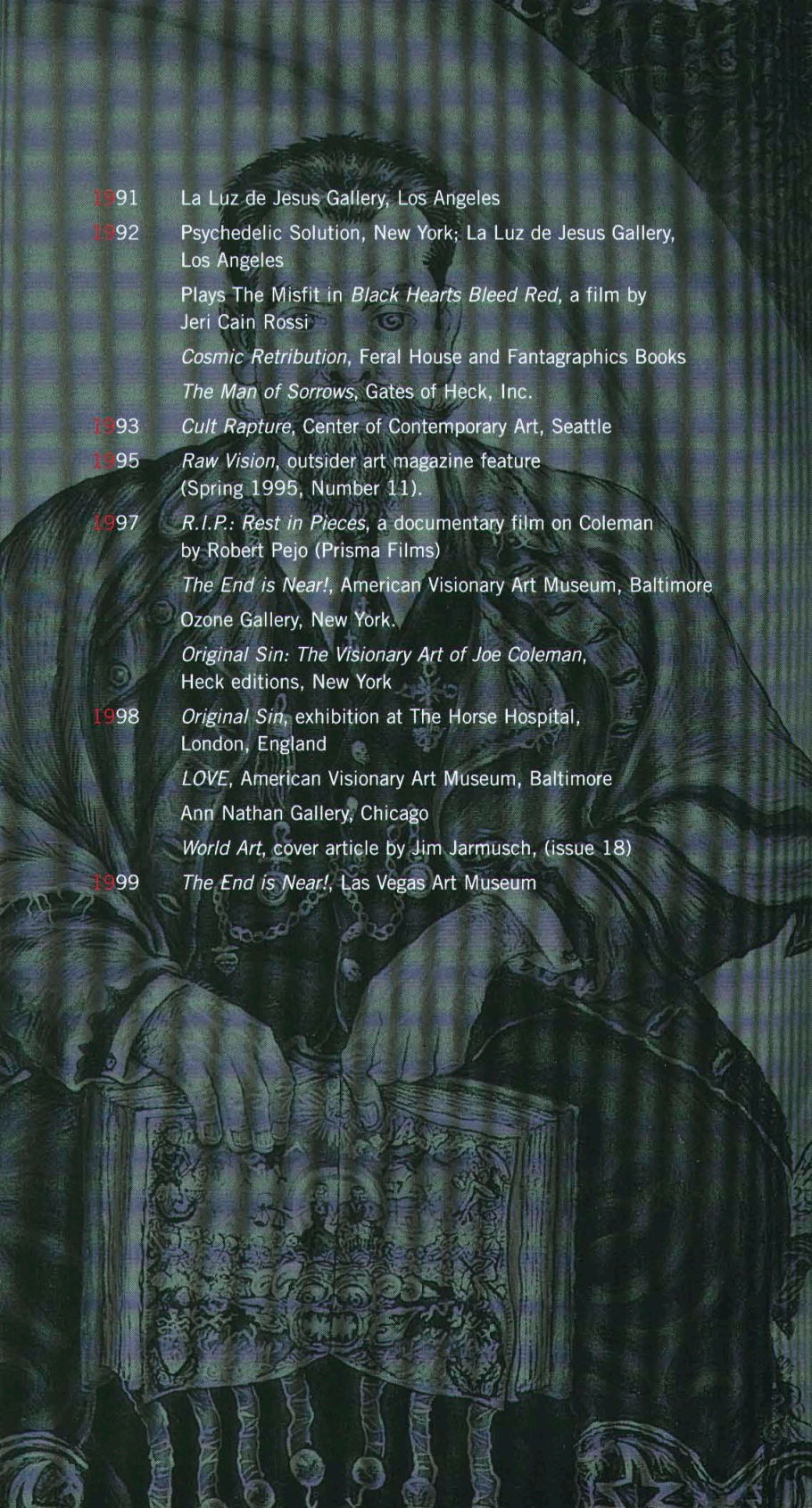
The Book of Revelations, 1999
25" x 34", acrylic, fabric, paper and blood on wood
Courtesy of James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles

The Odditorium, 1999
Installation
Courtesy of the artist

CHRONOLOGY
PERFORMANCES, PUBLICATIONS, EXHIBITIONS

1955	Joe Coleman Jr., born November 22, Norwalk, Connecticut
1972	Begins "party explosions" series of performances
1975	Begins performing as lead singer of "psychobilly" band *The Steel Tips*
1976	Attends School of Visual Arts, New York
	Bizarre Sex, Kitchen Sink Press
1977	*The Joe Coleman Portfolio*, Bagginer Press
1980	"Ten-year high-school reunion" (a.k.a. The Doug Sprag prank), performance
1981	First "art world" performance, The Kitchen, New York
1982	*The Mystery of Woolverine Woo-bait*, self-published
1985	Limbo Gallery; Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York
1986	Wooster Gallery; Chronocide Gallery; Limbo Gallery and Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York
1987	New York Academy of Art, New York; Center of Contemporary Art, Seattle
1988	Performances at Yale University; The Göteborg Film Festival, Sweden; The Werkstattkino, Munich; Hotel Amazon, New York
	Todd Capp Gallery, New York
	Appears in "shockumentary" film, *Mondo New York*
1989	La Luz de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles; Stockwell Gallery, New York
	Boston Film and Video Foundation, performance
1990	*Infernal Machine picture-disk LP*, Blast First Records

IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL, 1998



1991 La Luz de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles

1992 Psychedelic Solution, New York; La Luz de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles

Plays The Misfit in *Black Hearts Bleed Red*, a film by Jeri Cain Rossi

Cosmic Retribution, Feral House and Fantagraphics Books

The Man of Sorrows, Gates of Heck, Inc.

1993 *Cult Rapture*, Center of Contemporary Art, Seattle

1995 *Raw Vision*, outsider art magazine feature (Spring 1995, Number 11).

1997 *R.I.P.: Rest in Pieces*, a documentary film on Coleman by Robert Pejo (Prisma Films)

The End is Near!, American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore

Ozone Gallery, New York.

Original Sin: The Visionary Art of Joe Coleman, Heck editions, New York

1998 *Original Sin*, exhibition at The Horse Hospital, London, England

LOVE, American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore

Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago

World Art, cover article by Jim Jarmusch, (issue 18)

1999 *The End is Near!*, Las Vegas Art Museum

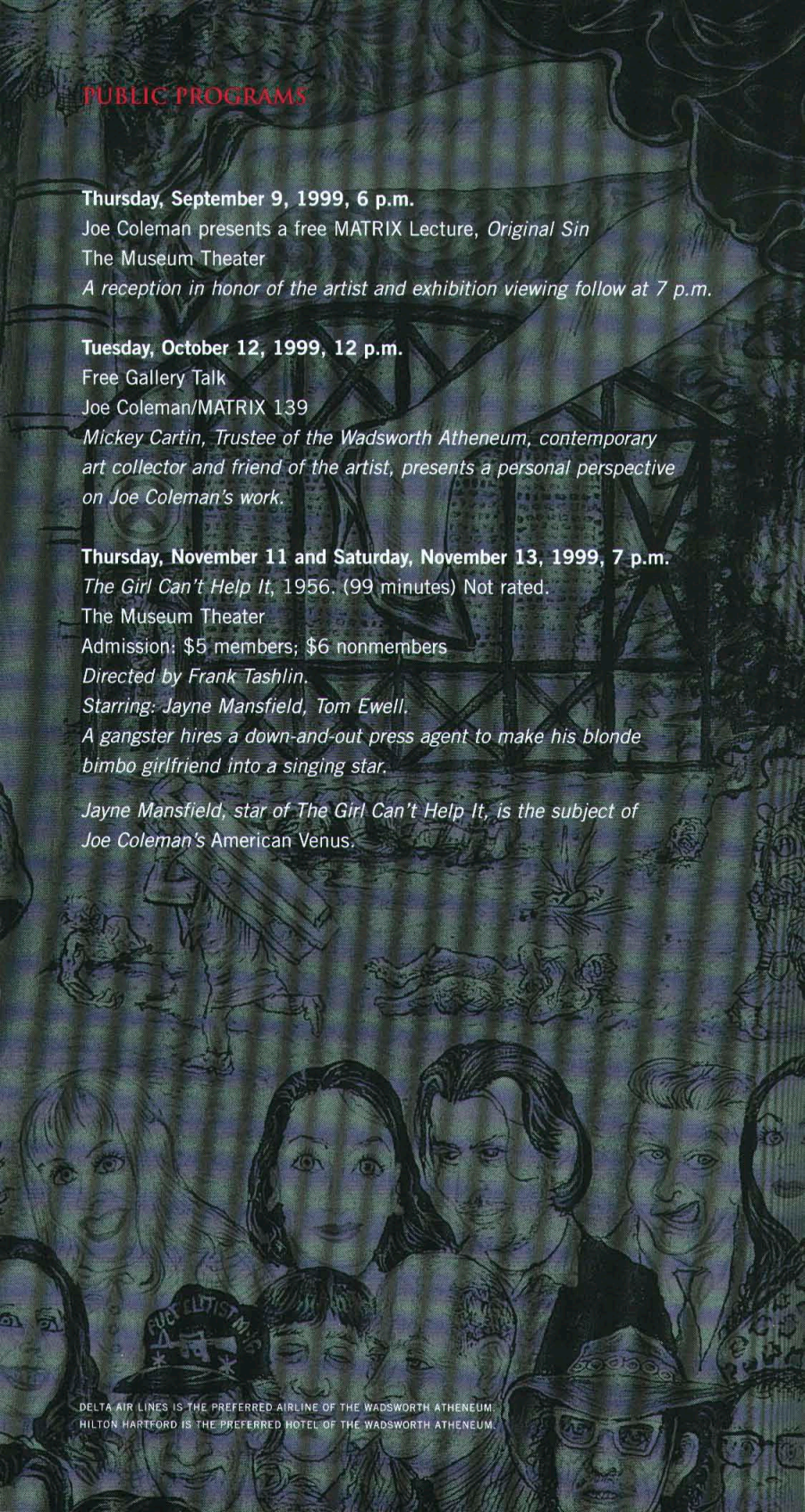
PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Thursday, September 9, 1999, 6 p.m.
Joe Coleman presents a free MATRIX Lecture, *Original Sin*
The Museum Theater
A reception in honor of the artist and exhibition viewing follow at 7 p.m.

Tuesday, October 12, 1999, 12 p.m.
Free Gallery Talk
Joe Coleman/MATRIX 139
Mickey Cartin, Trustee of the Wadsworth Atheneum, contemporary art collector and friend of the artist, presents a personal perspective on Joe Coleman's work.

Thursday, November 11 and Saturday, November 13, 1999, 7 p.m.
The Girl Can't Help It, 1956. (99 minutes) Not rated.
The Museum Theater
Admission: $5 members; $6 nonmembers
Directed by Frank Tashlin.
Starring: Jayne Mansfield, Tom Ewell.
A gangster hires a down-and-out press agent to make his blonde bimbo girlfriend into a singing star.

Jayne Mansfield, star of The Girl Can't Help It, is the subject of Joe Coleman's American Venus.



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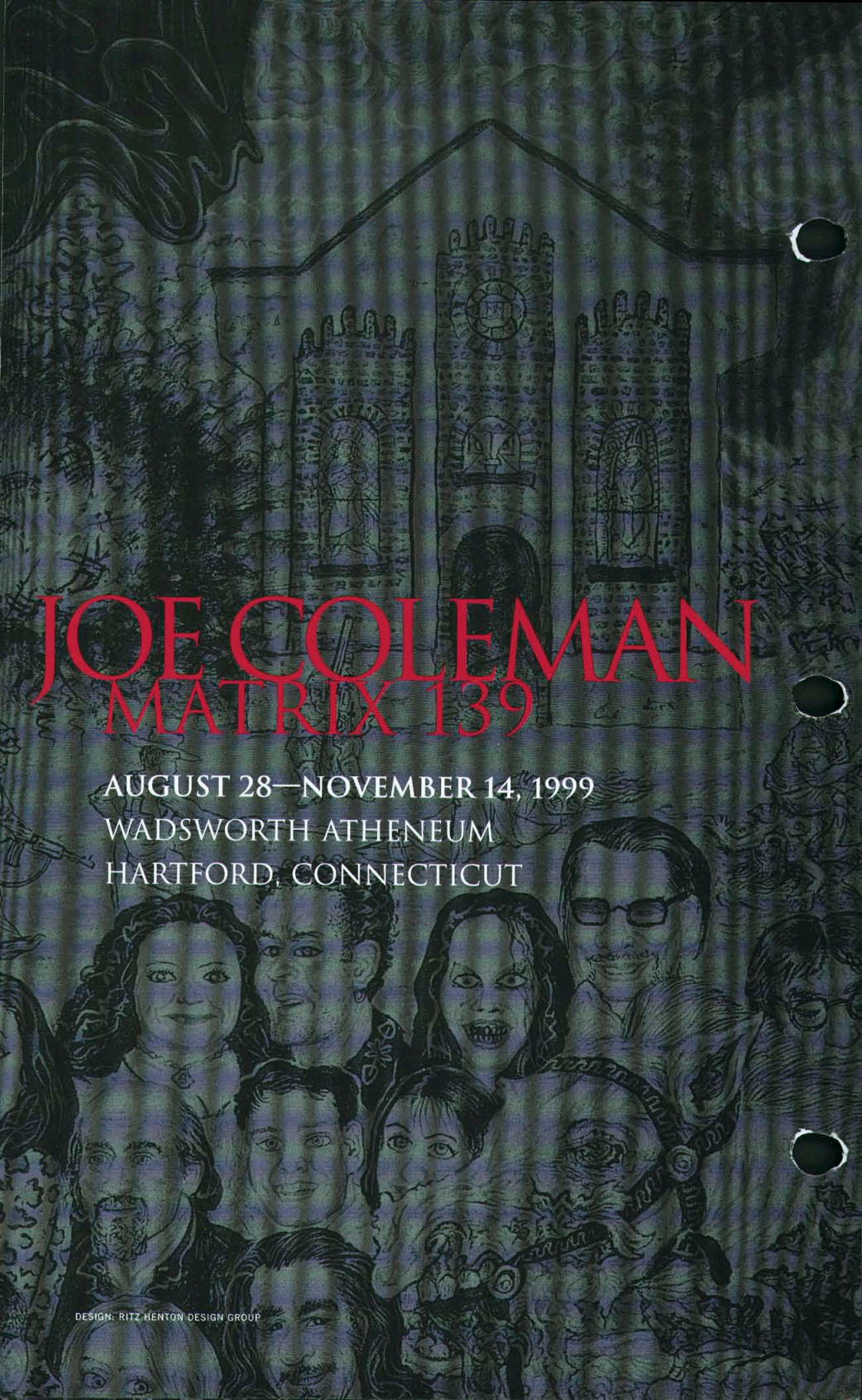
HILTON HARTFORD IS THE PREFERRED HOTEL OF THE WADSWORTH ATHENEUM.



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DESIGN: RITZ HENTON DESIGN GROUP